

Precious Children—A Gift from God

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From the book of Matthew we learn that after Jesus and His disciples descended from the Mount of Transfiguration, they paused at Galilee, then came to Capernaum. The disciples said unto Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

“And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

“And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

“Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

“And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

“But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matt. 18:1–6.)

I think it significant that Jesus loved these little ones who so recently had left the preexistence to come to earth. Children then and children now bless our lives, kindle our love, and prompt our good deeds.

Is it any wonder that the poet Wordsworth speaks thus of our birth: “Trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God, who is our home.” (William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1924, p. 359.)

Most of these little ones come to parents who eagerly await their arrival, mothers and fathers who rejoice to be a part of that miracle we call birth. No sacrifice is too great, no pain too severe, no waiting too long.

No wonder we are shocked when a wire story originating from a city in America informs that “a newborn girl who was wrapped in a paper bag and dumped in a garbage can is under close observation at a hospital. The child is doing well. ‘She’s a real beautiful, healthy baby,’ a hospital spokesman said Wednesday. Police said the infant was discovered after

trash men emptied the garbage can into the back end of their dump truck and saw something move in the debris. Authorities are looking for the mother.”

It is our solemn duty, our precious privilege—even our sacred opportunity—to welcome to our homes and to our hearts the children who grace our lives.

Our children have three classrooms of learning which are quite distinct one from another. I speak of the classroom at school, the classroom in church, and the classroom called home.

The Church has always had a vital interest in public education and encourages its members to participate in parent-teacher activities and other events designed to improve the education of our youth.

There is no more important aspect of public education than the teacher who has the opportunity to love, to teach, and to inspire eager boys and girls and young men and young women. President David O. McKay said, “Teaching is the noblest profession in the world. Upon the proper education of youth depend the permanency and purity of home, the safety and perpetuity of the nation. The parent gives the child an opportunity to live; the teacher enables the child to live well.” (David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals*, Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953, p. 436.) I trust we shall recognize their importance and their vital mission by providing adequate facilities, the finest of books, and salaries which show our gratitude and our trust.

Each of us remembers with affection the teachers of our youth. I think it amusing that my elementary school music teacher was a Miss Sharp. She had the capacity to infuse within her pupils a love for music and taught us to identify musical instruments and their sounds. I well recall the influence of a Miss Ruth Crow who taught the subject of health. Though these were depression times, she ensured that each sixth-grade student had a dental health chart. She personally checked each pupil for dental health and made certain that through public or private resources, no child went without proper dental care. As Miss Burkhaus, who taught geography, rolled down the maps of the world and, with her pointer, marked the capital cities of nations and the distinctive features of each country, language, and culture, little did I anticipate or dream that one day I would visit these lands and peoples.

Oh, the importance in the lives of our children of teachers who lift their spirits, sharpen their intellects, and motivate their very lives!

The classroom at church adds a vital dimension to the education of every child and youth. In this setting each teacher can provide an upward reach to those who listen to her lessons and feel the influence of her testimony. In Primary, Sunday School, Young Women meetings and

those of the Aaronic Priesthood, well-prepared teachers, called under the inspiration of the Lord, can touch each child, each youth, and prompt all to “seek ... out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” (D&C 88:118.) A word of encouragement here and a spiritual thought there can affect a precious life and leave an indelible imprint upon an immortal soul.

Many years ago, at a Church magazine awards banquet, we sat with President and Sister Harold B. Lee. President Lee said to our teenage daughter Ann, “The Lord has blessed you with a beautiful face and body. Keep the inside just as beautiful as the outside, and you will be blessed with true happiness.” This master teacher left with Ann an inspired guide to the celestial kingdom of our Heavenly Father.

The humble and inspired teacher in the church classroom can instill in her pupils a love for the scriptures. Why, the teacher can bring the Apostles of old and the Savior of the world not only into the classroom but also into the hearts, the minds, the souls of our children.

Perhaps most significant of all classrooms is the classroom of the home. It is in the home that we form our attitudes, our deeply held beliefs. It is in the home that hope is fostered or destroyed. Our homes are the laboratories of our lives. What we do there determines the course of our lives when we leave home. Dr. Stuart E. Rosenberg wrote in his book *The Road to Confidence*, “Despite all new inventions and modern designs, fads and fetishes, no one has yet invented, or will ever invent, a satisfying substitute for one’s own family.”

A happy home is but an earlier heaven. President George Albert Smith asked, “Do we want our homes to be happy? If we do, let them be the abiding place of prayer, thanksgiving and gratitude.” (In Conference Report, Apr. 1944, p. 32.)

There are those situations where children come to mortality with a physical or mental handicap. Try as we will, it is not possible to know why or how such events occur. I salute those parents who without complaint take such a child into their arms and into their lives and provide that added measure of sacrifice and love to one of Heavenly Father’s children.

This past summer at Aspen Grove Family Camp, I observed a mother patiently feeding a teenage daughter injured at birth and totally dependent upon Mother. Mother administered each spoonful of food, each swallow of water, while holding steady the head and neck of her daughter. Silently I thought to myself, *For seventeen years, Mother has provided this service and all others to her daughter, never thinking of her own comfort, her own pleasure, her own food.* May God bless such mothers, such fathers, such children. And He will.

Parents everywhere realize that the most powerful combination of emotions in the world is not called out by any grand cosmic event, nor is it found in novels or history books, but merely by a parent gazing down upon a sleeping child.

When doing so, the truth of the words of Charles M. Dickenson come to mind:

*They are idols of hearts and households;
They are angels of God in disguise;
The sunlight still sleeps in their tresses,
His glory still gleams in their eyes,
These truants from home and from Heaven,
They have made me more manly and mild;
And I know now how Jesus could liken
The Kingdom of God to a child.*

In our daily experiences with children, we discover they are most perceptive and often utter profound truths. Charles Dickens, the author of the classic *A Christmas Carol*, illustrated this fact when he described the humble Bob Cratchit family assembling for a rather meager but long-anticipated Christmas dinner. Bob, the father, was returning home with his frail son Tiny Tim upon his shoulder. Tiny Tim “bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame.” Bob’s wife asked of him, “And how did little Tim behave?”

“‘As good as gold,’ said Bob, ‘and better. Somehow he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see.’” (Charles Dickens, *Christmas Carol and Cricket on the Hearth*, New York: Grosset and Dunlop, n.d., pp. 50–51.)

Charles Dickens himself said, “I love these little people, and it is not a slight thing when they who are so fresh from God love us.”

Children express their love in original and innovative ways. On my birthday a few weeks ago a precious little girl presented me with her handwritten birthday card and enclosed in the envelope a tiny toy padlock which she liked and thought I would enjoy receiving as a gift.

“Of all the dear sights in the world, nothing is so beautiful as a child when it is giving something. Any small thing it gives. A child gives the world to you. It opens the world to you as if it were a book you’d never been able to read. But when a gift must be found, it is always some absurd little thing, pasted on crooked, ... an angel looking like a clown. A child has so little that it can give, because it never knows it has given you everything.” (Margaret Lee Runbeck, *Bits & Pieces*, 20 Sept. 1990.)

Such was Jenny's gift to me.

Children seem to be endowed with abiding faith in their Heavenly Father and His capacity and desire to answer their sweet prayers. It has been my personal experience that when a child prays, God listens.

Let me share with you the experience of Barry Bonnell and Dale Murphy, well-known professional baseball players formerly with the Atlanta Braves baseball club. Each is a convert to the Church, Dale Murphy having been baptized by Barry Bonnell.

"An experience occurred during the 1978 season that Barry described as "life changing." He was struggling terribly, batting about .200. Because of his poor performance, he was down on himself and felt miserable. He really didn't want to go when Dale Murphy asked him to "come along to the hospital," but he went anyway. There he met Ricky Little, a stalwart Atlanta Braves' supporter, but a youngster afflicted with leukemia. It was readily apparent that Ricky was near death. Barry felt a deep desire to think of something comforting to say, but nothing seemed adequate. Finally, he asked if there were anything they could do. The youngster hesitated and then asked if they would each hit a home run for him during the next game. Barry said later, "That request wasn't such a hard thing for Dale, who in fact hit two homers that night, but I was struggling at the plate and hadn't hit a homer all year. Then I felt a warm feeling come over me and I told Ricky to count on it." That night, Barry hit his only home run of the season. (Jim Ison, *Mormons in the Major Leagues*.) A child's prayer had been answered, a child's wish had been fulfilled.

If only all children had loving parents, safe homes, and caring friends, what a wonderful world would be theirs. Unfortunately, not all children are so bounteously blessed. Some children witness their fathers savagely beating their mothers, while others are on the receiving end of such abuse. What cowardice, what depravity, what shame!

Local hospitals everywhere receive these little ones, bruised and battered, accompanied by bald-faced lies that the child "ran into the door" or "fell down the stairs." Liars, bullies who abuse children, they will one day reap the whirlwind of their foul deeds. The quiet, the hurt, the offended child victim of abuse, and at times incest, must receive help.

A district judge, in a letter to me, declared, "Sexual abuse of children is one of the most depraved, destructive, and demoralizing crimes in civilized society. There is an alarming increase of reported physical, psychological, and sexual abuse of children. Our courts are becoming inundated with this repulsive behavior."

The Church does not condone such heinous and vile conduct. Rather, we condemn in the harshest of terms such treatment of God's precious children. Let the child be rescued, nurtured, loved, and healed. Let the offender be brought to justice, to accountability, for his actions and receive professional treatment to curtail such wicked and devilish conduct. When you and I know of such conduct and fail to take action to eradicate it, we become part of the problem. We share part of the guilt. We experience part of the punishment.

I trust I have not spoken too harshly, but I love these little ones and know that the Lord loves them, too. No more touching account of this love can be found than the experience of Jesus blessing the children as described in 3 Nephi. It tells of Jesus healing the sick, teaching the people, and praying to Heavenly Father for them. But then let me quote the precious words:

"[Jesus] took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them.

"And when he had done this he wept again;

"And he spake unto the multitude, and said unto them: Behold your little ones.

"And as they looked to behold they cast their eyes towards heaven, and they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of the heaven as it were in the midst of fire; ... and the angels did minister unto them." (3 Ne. 17:21–24.)

You may ask: *Do such things occur even today?* Let me share with you the beautiful account of a grandmother and a grandfather now serving a mission and the manner in which their little grandson was blessed. The missionary grandfather wrote:

"My wife, Deanna, and I are now serving a mission in Jackson, Ohio. One of our big concerns as we accepted a mission call was our family. We would not be there when they had problems.

"Just before we went on our mission, our grandson R. J., who was two-and-a-half years old, had to have surgery to correct a crossed eye. His mother asked me to go with them because R. J. and I are real buddies. The operation went well, but R. J. did cry before and after the surgery because none of the family could go into the operating room, and he was afraid.

"About six months later, while we were still on our mission, R. J. needed the other eye corrected. His mother phoned and expressed her desire for me to be there to go with them for the second operation. Of course, distance and the mission prevented me from being with him. Deanna

and I fasted and prayed for the Lord to comfort our grandson during his operation.

“We called shortly after the surgery was over and found that R. J. had remembered the previous experience and did not want to leave his parents. But as soon as he entered the operating room, he quieted down. He lay down on the operating table, took off his glasses for them, and went through the operation with a calm spirit. We were very thankful; our prayers had been answered.

“A couple of days later, we called our daughter and asked about R. J. He was doing fine, and she related this incident to us: In the afternoon after the operation, R. J. awakened and told his mother that Grandpa was there during the operation. He said, ‘Grandpa was there and made it all right.’ You see, the Lord made the anesthesiologist appear to that little boy as though he were his grandpa, but his grandpa and grandma were on a mission 1,800 miles away.”

Grandpa may not have been by your bedside, R. J., but you were in his prayers and in his thoughts. You were cradled in the hand of the Lord and blessed by the Father of us all.

My dear brothers and sisters, may the laughter of children gladden our hearts. May the faith of children soothe our souls. May the love of children prompt our deeds. “Children are an heritage of the Lord.” (Ps. 127:3.) May our Heavenly Father ever bless these sweet souls, these special friends of the Master, in my humble and earnest prayer. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.